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ABSTRACT

Television research suggests that three major television networks are following a policy of standardization and that a high degree of consonance in prime-time network programing results from constraints within the networks' organizational, economic, and ideological frameworks. A study further explored these results by examining a list of all regularly scheduled fall network prime-time programs from 1953 to 1984. From 2,891 programs coded into nine categories four hypotheses were generated: (1) the ranks of proportions of prime-time programing content among the networks would be similar; (2) there would be a negative trend in the number of programs offered on the networks' fall prime-time network; (3) there would be a negative trend in the number of program categories; and (4) there would be a positive trend in the average length of regularly scheduled programs. The findings indicated that action/adventure shows and situation comedies have dominated programing, with little diversity in the networks. In 1953 and 1954 there were 147 programs but by 1973, only 63. Program categories varied from a high of 25 in 1955 to 9 in 1979 and 1984; in 1953 and 1954 the average length of programs was 30 minutes, but by 1980 average length was one hour. Results show that the networks have been remarkably similar in content, and that this consonance reduces the ways people can screen themselves from media impact and demonstrates the networks' vested interest in maintaining the status quo. (SRT)

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# Consonance in Network Prime-Time Programming

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Each fall season the three major television networks attempt to entice viewers with promotional advertisements and slogans. This year, ABC is proclaiming, "You'll love us!" NBC is urging its viewers, "Let's all be there!" Meanwhile, CBS maintains, "We've got the touch!" While the three major networks strive to promote the novelty of their prime-time entertainment offerings, systematic research suggests that the networks are following a policy of standardization. The research reported here examines the extent of prime-time consonance among three networks -- ABC, CBS, and NBC -- for the period 1953-1984.

Why study long-term trends in prime-time consonance, or similarity in network content? A high degree of media consonance may enhance the potential for powerful media effects. According to Noelle-Neumann (1973), the effects of mass media increase in proportion to the degree to which selective perception is made difficult. If there are great similarities in prime-time content, there are few options for selective perception. In addition, many of the negative effects attributed to network television content assume long-term, repetitive patterns of content. The cultivation hypothesis, for example, predicts that long-term exposure to patterns of television content will cultivate misconceptions

of reality (Gerbner et al., 1980). Moreover, message consonance is problematic in a society which values diversity and pluralism in the communication market place. Democratic theory rests on the assumption that open competition will provide the public with a multiplicity of information and opinions on which to base its decisions.

Previous studies revealed that a high degree of consonance probably exists in prime-time network programming. Dominick and Pearce (1976) documented a decline in diversity in prime-time entertainment programming from 1953 to 1974. Persky (1977) argued that variety was vanishing from network television and asserted that the public had a right to complain about the decline in programming choice. Wakshlag and Adams (1985) found that a sharp decline in network diversity coincided with the introduction of the 1971 Prime Time Access Rule, and this decline has lingered. Litman (1980) found a slight increase in network variety in the late 1970s, but his study covered only a five-year period and must be placed into a larger context. The bulk of the empirical evidence indicates that pluralism and diversity in prime-time programming are down. A high degree of between network consonance also has been shown in network coverage of news (Riffe et al., 1985).

What factors contribute to prime-time consonance? Media sociology theory predicts that there will be substantial similarity in the types of entertainment programs offered by three competing networks. Prime-time consonance is the result

of constraints brought on by the organizational, economic and ideological frameworks within which the networks operate. These restrictive factors work to reduce program diversity and ultimately may serve to reinforce the dominant sociopolitical system.

Organizational factors contributing to prime-time consonance include the socialization of people within the network industrial complex and the organizational structures of the television industry (Gitlin, 1982). Cantor (1971) focused on the work of the creators of prime-time series and how they are constrained by organizational imperatives and work relationships. Another organizational constraint on the network's ability to provide society with diverse programming is their reliance on the same suppliers of prime-time programs. About two dozen Hollywood companies create prime-time entertainment series (Cantor, 1980).

Some observers believe that the audience is the main directing force responsible for prime-time content. Seiden (1974) argues, for example, that market research and ratings services determine content. Because network television is a marketing medium, it must present programs which appeal to a large number of viewers. Other scholars attribute the homogenization of prime-time content to the oligarchical structure of the U.S. television industry (Dominick & Pearce, 1976). Within an oligarchical system there is pressure toward equilibrium and a tendency not to upset the status quo.

Some theorists argue that ideological constraints lead to

uniformity in prime-time content. Tuchman (1974) believes that the major television networks pepetuate hegemony, thereby legitimizing existing socio-economic and political patterns. The long-term effect of hegemony is to reduce diversity and bury the possibility that new ideas may emerge. A high degree of network consonance may be an important means of building support for society's dominant institutions and ideologies.

Regardless of the reasons -- organizational, economic or ideological --the prevailing point of view is that diversity and pluralism in prime-time content are shrinking. The present study was designed to test the general hypothesis that the networks have been following a policy of homogenization.

## Methods

The author examined a list of all regularly scheduled fall network prime-time programs from 1953-1984. The list of programs was obtained from Total Television: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to 1980 (McNeil, 1980), The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows: 1946-Present (Brooks & Marsh, 1976), The TV Schedule Book (Castleman & Podrazik, 1984), and from TV Guide for 1982-1984.

Two coders analyzed the program listings, identifying the type of program, its network and its length, among other variables. In the initial coding stages, the number of program categories reached 35. This was done in order to be as precise as possible. In the final stage of recoding, the 35 categories were collapsed into nine, one of which was a

miscellaneous category. The final nine categories were as follow: action/adventure, situation comedy, variety shows, drama shows, movies, game/quiz, news/documentary, sports and other programs. These categories are self-explanatory. Intercoder reliability was tested by having each person code a random sample of 100 programs and then comparing the coding decisions of the two individuals. The two coded identically 92% of the time.

The list of regularly scheduled fall prime-time network programs offered in the 32 years covered by the study generated a total of 2,891 programs to analyze. As shown in Table 1, the programs were distributed fairly evenly among the three networks.

## Hypotheses

If notions about the standardization of prime-time network are correct, there should be similarities between the ranks of proportions of program types among the networks. Thus it was predicted:

H1: The ranks of proportions of prime-time programming content among the three networks will be similar.

The overall pattern of prime-time consonance was determined by measuring the among network rank-order correlation for the entire 32-year period. Specifically, the statistical test used was Kendall's coefficient of concordance (Seigel, 1956). Although this is admittedly a rather gross level of analysis, the primary concern was ascertaining the

general pattern of content emphasis.

In addition to obtaining a broad picture of the degree of network consonance, the author also was interested in testing long-term trends in program variety. So three simple indicators were developed:

1. The number of programs offered. This is simply the number of different programs offered each year on the networks' fall prime-time schedule. A higher number of programs indicates a greater potential for program diversity.

2. The number of program categories offered. This is merely the number of content categories offered each year on the networks' fall prime-time schedule. It is based on the original 35 categories of program types. Again, a higher number of categories offered indicates a greater potential for program variety.

3. Average program length. The average length of network fall prime-time programs was computed for each year covered in the study. Shorter programs indicate a broader range of programming choices for the audience.

If previous findings are correct, there should be a trend toward less diversity (and more consonance) in network prime-time content. So it was hypothesized:

H2: There is a negative trend in the number of programs offered on the networks' fall prime-time schedule.

H3: There is a negative trend in the number of program categories offered on the networks' fall prime-time schedule.

H4: There is a positive trend in the average length of

regularly scheduled network prime-time programs.

Long-term trends in prime-time content were measured by using a nonparametric test for the trend -- Kendall's coefficient of disarray. This test makes no assumption about a normal distribution and is simply a test for randomness (Tintner, 1952).

The criterion variables in the trend analysis portion of the study were the three rough measures of prime-time variety (number of programs offered, number of categories offered and average program length). Time -- the period 1953-1984 -- was considered the independent variable. It must be noted, however, that in trend analysis time is actually a surrogate for some more substantive factor (Becker, 1982).

## Findings

Distribution of program types. How has network prime-time content actually been divided among programs of different types? Table 2 shows the percentage of programs devoted to each content category for the period 1953-1984. The findings indicate that action/adventure shows and situation comedies have dominated network prime-time programming. During the 32-year period covered by the study, these two program types accounted for more than half of all regularly scheduled programs offered. Action series accounted for the greatest number of prime-time programs, 26.5%. Situation comedies were next with 25.8%, and variety shows had 15.0%.

Table 2 also reveals that drama shows accounted for 13.3% of prime-time programs. Movies and news/documentary each had 4.7%, and sports programs filled 2.7% of the fall prime-time schedule. In short, the world of network prime-time television has been a world of action/adventure series and sitcoms.

Consonance: The overall pattern. Hypothesis 1 suggested that there would be similar rankings of proportions of content among the three networks for the entire 32-year period. Content was collapsed into nine categories and rank-ordered for each network. These ranks are shown in Table 3.

A Kendall coefficient of concordance was computed to determine the level of agreement among the three networks. And, as Table 3 indicates, the data support the hypothesis. The overall level of agreement is high and statistically significant ($W=+.87$, $n=9$, $p<.01$). The author also tested the rank-order correlations between each pair of networks and found these Spearman rhos also are high and significant (see Table 3). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Even though the crudeness of a set of categories can inflate a measure of rank correlation, the magnitude of the correlation is striking. The evidence clearly indicates there has been little diversity in the network television system.

Trends in program variety. Table 4 presents tabular data indicating longitudinal trends in program variety. The data clearly support the notion that prime-time diversity has declined over time. Hypothesis 2 suggested there is a

negative trend in the number of programs offered on the networks' fall prime-time schedule. As Table 5 indicates, the data produce a coefficient of disarray that is highly negative and statistically significant (-.71, n=32, p<.ØØ1). Thus, Hypothessis 2 is supported; there is clearly a negative trend in the data for the 32-year period. In 1953 and 1954 there were 147 different programs offered on the networks' fall prinme-time schedule. By 1973 the number of regularly scheduled programs had dropped to a low of 63.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a negative trend in the number of program categories offered on the networks' fall prime-time schedule. The correlation between the criterion variable, number of categories, and the independent variable, time, is strong, significant, and negative (-.76, n=32, p<.ØØ1). Consequently, Hypothesis 3 is supported. The number of program categories offered by the three major networks varied from a high of 25 in 1955 to a low of nine in 1979 and 1984.

Not surprisingly, the number of programs offered on the fall prime-time schedule and the number of content categories offered are strongly correlated (+.68, n=32, p<.ØØ1).

Hypothesis 4 suggested that there is a positive trend in the average length of network prime-time programs, that is, over time programs have become longer. As indicated in Table 5, the data produce a coefficient of disarray that is strong and significant (+.72, n=32, p<.ØØ1). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported. During the 195Øs and 6Øs, a greater number of 15 and 3Ø minute programs appeared on the fall schedule. By the

mid-1970s, nearly all 15 minute programs had been phased out. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of prime-time movies offered since the early 1970s. This has contributed substantially to the increase in average program length. In 1953 and 1954 the average length of network prime-time programs was 30 minutes. By 1980 average program length had doubled to one hour. The positive trend in average program length indicates that viewers have fewer network programs from which to choose.

As one would expect, the average length of prime-time programs is negatively correlated with both the number of programs offered (-.93, n=32, p<.001) and the number of content categories offered (-.68, n=32, p<.001).

Despite the crudeness of the three diversity measures used in this trend analysis, the data taken as a whole strongly suggest that variety in prime-time network programming has been shrinking. In all probability there is a long-term trend toward less program diversity in the networks' fall prime-time schedule.

## Conclusions

The present study examined the extent of consonance in prime-time network programming for the period 1953-1984. Prime-time content was collapsed into nine categories and then rank-ordered for each network. The overall level of agreenent among the three networks is high and statistically significant. The findings indicate that NBC, ABC and CBS have been

remarkably similar in general, long-term patterns of content emphasis. Entertainment programs (action series, sitcoms) have dominated the world of prime-time network television. Reality programs (news/documentary, sports) have filled only a small portion of the network prime-time schedule.

The findings presented here also suggest that program diversity declined in the 32-year period covered by the study. A negative trend can be seen in both the number of programs offered on the fall schedule and the number of content categories offered. Meanwhile, there has been a steady increase in average program length. Simply put, the range of program choices available to viewers has declined substantially across time.

To conclude, these findings -- combined with the findings of earlier studies -- point toward a high level of similarity in the content of prime-time network television. Of course, content analysis alone cannot serve as a basis for making claims about the long-term effects of television content. Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate about the consequences of consonance in prime-time network programming.

At the micro-level, a high level of consonance may strengthen television's ability to shape viewers' perceptions of reality. Network emphases on certain types of programs are presumably passed on to viewers, especially if patterns are repeated over long periods of time. Consonance reduces the ways people can screen themselves from media impact. If television's fantasy portrayals can indeed cultivate perceptions of reality, then a high degree of network consonance may enhance the

the potential for cultivation-type effects.

At the macro-level, the data presented here lend at least indirect support for the hegemony perspective. The networks obviously have a vested interest in seeing that the status quo continues. A high level of consonance may stengthen the networks' ability to perpetuate the status quo, legitimizing existing economic and political patterns and reducing the number of voices in the communication market place. Consonance may also contribute to reinforcement effects, which help perpetuate dominate values and beliefs. The major effect of prime-time consonance may be its contribution to the stabilization of the prevailing socio-political system. Additional study will be needed to assess the long-term effects of network prime-time consonance at both the individual and group levels.

Table 1

Distribution of Programs
Across Networks

| Network | N of Programs | %tage of Programs |
|---|---|---|
| ABC | 984 | 34.Ø |
| CBS | 1Ø2Ø | 35.3 |
| NBC | 887 | 3Ø.7 |
| | ---- | ---- |
| Total | 2891 | 1ØØ.Ø |

Table 2

Distribution of Programs
Across Content Categories

| Category | N of Programs | %tage of Programs |
|---|---|---|
| Action | 767 | 26.5 |
| Sitcom | 747 | 25.8 |
| Variety | 434 | 15.Ø |
| Drama | 384 | 13.3 |
| Movies | 137 | 4.7 |
| News | 137 | 4.7 |
| Game | 132 | 4.6 |
| Sports | 78 | 2.7 |
| Other | 75 | 2.6 |
| | ---- | ---- |
| Total | 2891 | 1ØØ.Ø |

Table 3

Distribution of Content Rankings Among Networks

| | Networks | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ABC | | CBS | | NBC | |
| Category | % | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank |
| Action | 27.5 | 1 | 23.5 | 2 | 28.9 | 1 |
| Sitcom | 26.1 | 2 | 33.1 | 1 | 17.1 | 3 |
| Variety | 12.7 | 3 | 13.3 | 4 | 19.5 | 2 |
| Drama | 9.6 | 4 | 14.7 | 3 | 15.8 | 4 |
| Movies | 4.6 | 7 | 3.8 | 6 | 6.Ø | 5 |
| News | 6.7 | 5 | 3.5 | 7 | 3.9 | 6 |
| Game | 3.5 | 9 | 6.4 | 5 | 3.7 | 7 |
| Sports | 5.5 | 6 | Ø.4 | 9 | 2.3 | 9 |
| Other | 3.9 | 8 | 1.2 | 8 | 2.8 | 8 |
| | n=984 | | n=1Ø2Ø | | n=887 | |

ABC-CBS-NBC: W=.87, n=9, p<.Ø1
ABC-CBS: rho=.77, n=9, p<.Ø1
CBS-NBC: rho=.87, n=9, p<.ØØ1
NBC-ABC: rho=.85, n=9, p<.Ø1

Table 4

Long-Term Trends in Prime-Time Diversity

| Year | Number of Programs Offered | Number of Categories Offered | Average Length (minutes) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1953 | 147 | 22 | 30 |
| 1954 | 147 | 23 | 30 |
| 1955 | 137 | 25 | 33 |
| 1956 | 125 | 20 | 34 |
| 1957 | 129 | 19 | 34 |
| 1958 | 123 | 19 | 35 |
| 1959 | 114 | 17 | 41 |
| 1960 | 109 | 18 | 40 |
| 1961 | 106 | 19 | 44 |
| 1962 | 97 | 19 | 47 |
| 1963 | 89 | 20 | 50 |
| 1964 | 94 | 20 | 47 |
| 1965 | 99 | 18 | 45 |
| 1966 | 92 | 17 | 49 |
| 1967 | 84 | 15 | 53 |
| 1968 | 76 | 13 | 53 |
| 1969 | 83 | 16 | 54 |
| 1970 | 83 | 17 | 53 |
| 1971 | 67 | 14 | 57 |
| 1972 | 65 | 15 | 57 |
| 1973 | 63 | 12 | 59 |
| 1974 | 63 | 13 | 60 |
| 1975 | 68 | 10 | 56 |
| 1976 | 71 | 15 | 55 |
| 1977 | 70 | 13 | 56 |
| 1978 | 69 | 12 | 57 |
| 1979 | 67 | 9 | 56 |
| 1980 | 67 | 12 | 59 |
| 1981 | 74 | 15 | 53 |
| 1982 | 74 | 10 | 53 |
| 1983 | 70 | 10 | 55 |
| 1984 | 69 | 9 | 57 |

Table 5

Rank-Order Correlations Between
Measures of Prime-Time Diversity

| | Year 1953-84 | Number of Programs | Number of Categories | Average Length |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year 1953-84 | ---- | -.71 | -.76 | .72 |
| Number of Programs | | ---- | .68 | -.93 |
| Number of Categories | | | ---- | -.68 |
| Average Length | | | | ---- |

All correlations (Kendall's coefficient of disarray) are significant beyond the .ØØ1 level.

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